15 Culture and Consumption

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STRANGE as it may now seem, during the 1960s many American planners argued that shopping malls could provide solutions to suburban sprawl and urban anomie. Designer and developer Victor Gruen led the chorus, building some of the country's largest and best-publicized suburban shopping centers. Moreover, he wrote eloquently about their virtues. Speaking especially of the Northland and Eastland centers his company built in the Detroit metropolitan area, Gruen crowed that they had created a new, intense kind of community:

> I remember the surprised faces of my clients when we drove out to a shopping center on a Sunday and found the parking area full. The courts and malls, the lanes and promenades were filled with milling crowds dressed in their Sunday best, engaging in an activity that was believed to be long forgotten: family groups strolling leisurely, their youngsters in go-carts and dogs on the leash; relaxed and admiring the flowers and trees, sculptures and murals, fountains and ponds, and, incidentally, using the opportunity for window-shopping. To the joy of the merchants, this last resulted in strong business activity on the following weekdays. (1964, 203)

Gruen went on to boast that civic organizations, churches, hobby clubs, political rallies, art exhibitions, and theaters thrived in the new environment, even that "National minority groups arranged for special musical and folk dancing evenings" (1964, 203). Good planning, he concluded, could integrate retail activity with active social life.

A third of a century down the suburban road, political scientist turned prophet Robert Putnam offered a grimmer judgment of the shopping mall. "Rather than at the grocery store or five-and-dime on Main Street, where faces were familiar," lamented Putnam,

> today's suburbanites shop in large, impersonal malls. Although malls constitute America's most distinctive contemporary public space, they are carefully designed for one primary, private purpose—to direct consumers to buy. Despite the aspirations of some developers, mall culture is not about overcoming isolation and connecting with others, but about privately surfing from store to store—in the presence of others, but not in their company. The suburban shopping experience does not consist of interaction with people embedded in a common social network. (2000, 211)

The very innovations that Gruen thought were renewing lost community, according to Putnam, actually destroyed it. Increasingly, consumption privatized and isolated Americans instead of providing occasions and means of sociability.

In a sophisticated and closely documented account, Lizabeth Cohen (2003) reports what actually went on within America's transformed consumer marketplaces. Shopping centers did offer their customers a whole range of community activities, including charity fairs, Weight Watchers meetings, and concerts. Moreover, looked at closely, shopping turns out to have often been a joint family activity; women, who were the principal shoppers, frequently took their children and their husbands along with them. Spurred by anxious merchants, however, shopping malls became much more exclusive than city streets. Legal restrictions limited the range of political activities permitted and the kinds of people who could enter the malls. Finally, the malls catered to strongly segmented populations.

> When developers and store owners set out to make the shopping center a more perfect downtown, they aimed to exclude from this public space unwanted urban groups such as vagrants, prostitutes, racial minorities, and poor people. Market segmentation became the guiding principle of this mix of commercial and civic activity, as the shopping center sought perhaps contradictorily to legitimize itself as a true community center and to define that community in exclusionary socioeconomic and racial terms. (Cohen 1996, 1059)

Neither all-embracing communities nor habitats of the Lonely Crowd, shopping centers represent-

ed America as a whole: both connected and segmented, differentiated by gender, ethnicity, race, and class, mingling commercial and sociable activity, entangling consumption in the strands of meaningful social relations (see also Zukin 2003).

In principle, one might think that production, distribution, and consumption would occupy well-defined, tightly integrated, and roughly equal spaces in the work of economic sociologists. Within sociology, however, a rough division of labor has arisen: economic sociologists examine production and distribution with no more than occasional gestures toward consumption, while specialists in culture, gender, family, inequality, and other fields lavish attention on consumption almost without regard to the questions—or answers—posed by economic sociologists. Meanwhile (as the work of historian Lizabeth Cohen suggests), nonsociologists have been making major contributions to the study of consumption that have not regularly come to economic sociologists' attention.

The *Handbook*'s editors assigned me the analysis of interactions between culture and consumption, not the treatment of consumption as a whole. A full survey of consumption would require a close look at the interdependence among production, distribution, and consumption—for example, how producers promote purchase and use of newly designed goods and services. It would also entail consideration of macroeconomic interactions among prices, supply, and demand of consumer goods and services. Instead, my analysis stresses the participation of consumers in economic life. In compensation for that narrowing of its focus, it takes an exceptionally broad view of consumption.

Although this chapter concentrates on intersections of culture and consumption, the unfortunate existing division of labor between students of culture and specialists in economic processes warns precisely against the dangers of considering the two as separate spheres that only occasionally bump into each other. Reification of the boundary between culture and consumption encourages three incorrect and equally reductionist positions: (1) consumption is "really" rational maximizing behavior that acquires a carapace of culture after the fact; (2) consumption is essentially expressive behavior that does not conform at all to economic rationality; (3) consumption divides between a hard-nosed region of rational maximizing behavior and a soft-hearted region of cultural expression. In fact, all consumption (like all economic life) builds on culture in the sense of shared understandings and their representations. The secret to understanding consumption lies in careful observation of how culture, social relations, and economic processes interact.

With that aim in mind, let us take up in turn

1. Recent investigations of consumption outside of sociology
2. Sociological studies of consumption, outside the claimed territory of economic sociology
3. Consequent challenges to economic sociology

Following those three points, the chapter reviews three different sites of consumption—households, ethnic-racial communities, and retail settings—where extensive research has recently occurred, with an eye to better integration between economic sociology and empirical studies of consumption.

Consumption outside of Sociology

One might have thought that consumption would preoccupy economists, since it is the point where individual lives most obviously integrate into the economy at large. Through much of the twentieth century economists did study consumption in the aggregate. Economists long collaborated with sociologists in surveys of consumer expenditures and behavior, a line of work that significantly influenced market research. Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955), for example, applied the analysis of personal influence to both political and consumption behavior. Furthermore, a few economists braved the trend by giving the social determination of preferences a central place in their analysis; in a review of the topic, Juliet Schor (1998, 9) singles out Thorstein Veblen, James Duesenberry, John Kenneth Galbraith, Fred Hirsch, Tibor Scitovsky, Richard Easterlin, Amartya Sen, Clair Brown, and Robert Frank as leaders in the economic analysis of consumption (for a detailed review of consumption economics, see Frenzen, Hirsch, and Zerrillo 1994).

Nevertheless, economists have concentrated mostly on production and distribution, commonly throwing up their hands when it came to integrating change and variation in consumer preferences directly into economic analysis. As Gary Becker himself says:

> The economist's normal approach to analyzing consumption and leisure choices assumes that individuals maximize utility with preferences that depend at any moment only on the goods and services they consume at that time. These preferences are assumed to be in-

> dependent of both past and future consumption, and of the behavior of everyone else. This approach has proved to be a valuable simplification for addressing many economic questions, but a large number of choices in all societies depend very much on past experiences and social forces. (1996, 3–4)

Becker endogenizes preferences by retaining economics' cherished assumption of individual rational maximizing but incorporating two new aspects of human capital: *personal capital*, involving past consumption and other experiences that shape present and future preferences; and *social capital*, involving other people's past actions that shape the same preferences. Thus Becker clings to the economist's individual perspective but explicitly builds in experiential and social influences on the individual. Other economists seek to repair the conventional account of consumption by replacing abstract definitions of rational maximization with decision-making principles based on findings from psychologically sophisticated observations and experiments (see, e.g., Thaler 1991, 1999; Aversi et al. 1999). Both these "behavioral economists" and Becker-style neoclassical economists, then, sense that conventional economic accounts of consumption leave much unexplained. Similarly, psychologists in the lineage of Herbert Simon, Amos Tversky, and Daniel Kahneman have mounted influential critiques of neoclassical economics' behavioral assumptions (see, e.g., Kahneman and Tversky 1982). But they have not yet shifted the attention of most economists away from production and distribution.

Consumption has attracted much more attention outside of economics. Indeed, for the past quarter-century anthropologists, historians, cultural psychologists, marketing analysts, and cultural studies specialists have revolutionized traditional understandings of consumption. Rescuing consumption from the grip of social critics, budget experts, and marketers, scholars began asking, "Why do people want goods?" The so-called cultural turn swept away standard utilitarian and individualistic accounts of consumption as maximization. It also challenged deeply entrenched moralistic concerns about the corrupting effects of consumption by reframing the purchase and use of goods and services as meaningful practices. Similarly, students of gender countered the trivialization of consumption typical of earlier social history and social criticism. Where generations of home economists had tried to assimilate kitchen and nursery into the world of industrial efficiency, many feminists sought to identify distinctive cultural traits of woman's worlds, notably including the world of female consumption.

Specialists in gender played a crucial part in renewing consumption studies. They made a double contribution. First, they emphasized distinctions between the consumption patterns of women and men rather than taking consumption as a homogeneous expression of class or nationality. Second, they often challenged understandings of consumption as mass behavior by stressing the creativity and empowerment of female consumers. They did so by carefully investigating diverse facets of consumption's gendered practices, including interactions between saleswomen and customers in American department stores (Porter Benson 1986), middle-class women shoplifters (Abelson 1989), women's sale and use of cosmetics (Peiss 1998, 2002), immigrant housewives' expenditures (Ewen 1985), women shopping in London's West End (Rappoport 2000), Old Regime France seamstresses (Crowston 2001), and the American doll industry (Formanek-Brunell 1993). (See also Andrews and Talbot 2000; de Grazia and Furlough 1996; Horowitz and Mohun 1998; Scanlon 2000; and for male consumers Swiencicki 1999).

Meanwhile, anthropologists provided noneconomic or even antieconomic models of consumption. Marshall Sahlins's *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) along with Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *World of Goods* (1979) set the tone for the new consumption studies, boldly appropriating consumption into the domain of shared meanings. Two complementary trends occurred in anthropology, history, cultural studies, and a few corners of sociology: a shift of focus away from production and producers to consumption and consumers, as well as an increasing concentration on consumption as expressive behavior: the site of mentalities, identities, and culture.

In her contribution to a three-volume set that Craig Clunas (1999, 1497) called "a major monument in a turn toward the history of consumption and away from the history of production," Lorna Weatherill reports a characteristic study of probate inventories from late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England. Sampling from eight localities, including the London area, Weatherill reconstructs a wide range of household goods, showing variation by locality, occupation, social rank, and gender. She interprets the array of furniture, looking glasses, pictures, books, clocks, silver, and cooking utensils as expressing the special worldview of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ordinary people. For instance, detailed in-

ventories of cooking gear, Weatherill suggests, underline the centrality of food to daily life at that time.

More generally, Weatherill (1993, 211) declares that "material goods themselves contain implicit meanings and are therefore indicative of attitudes. Through understanding the nonmaterial attributes of goods it is possible to move to the meaning of ownership in social and other terms."

Scholars of consumption range widely, from studying economic institutions such as department stores, to analyses of commercialized leisure, taste formation, food consumption, media advertising, and household budgets (see, e.g., Miller 1981; Rosenzweig 1983; Tiersten 2001; Mintz 1996; Lears 1994; Horowitz 1985). Out of this variety of studies emerged a continuing conversation on the culture of consumption.[1]

In the 1990s, dissenting voices joined that conversation. Concerned that the "cultural turn" had gone too far, detouring its practitioners from other, crucial aspects of consumption processes, scholars urged new agendas. "Today's burgeoning cottage industry of study devoted to 'consumer culture,'" noted historians Victoria de Grazia and Lizabeth Cohen in 1999 (1), "draws its impulse . . . chiefly [from] the problem of postmodernity and the fluid social and personal identities it appears to have instated." Missing, according to de Grazia and Cohen, was the political economy of inequality and consumption, namely, its link to class relations and class power.[2] Missing as well, complained other specialists, were links between consumption and the production of goods (see, e.g., Crowston 2001; Green 1997).

In *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003) Lizabeth Cohen pushes forward the revised historical agenda, directly examining the political economy of American consumption in the period following the Second World War. Consumption, in her reading, is not merely expressive behavior, but a site, cause, and effect of major changes in American experience. In Cohen's view, the government-backed promotion of consumption during the 1930s as a cushion and antidote for economic crisis sowed the ground both for governmental intervention in wartime consumption and for postwar policies centered on consumption as foundation of a "consumer's republic" (for a contrary view of consumption, see Cross 2000).

Cohen's analysis demonstrates furthermore the heavy involvement of women and African-Americans in the politics of consumption. For example, Cohen reports:

> Throughout the North, and less visibly in the South, the ten years between the war and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 saw an explosion in black challenges to exclusion from public accommodations, many of them sites of consumption and leisure, given that much of public life transpired in commercial venues by the postwar era. By the time of Montgomery and the lunch-counter sit-ins and boycotts of the early 1960s—usually credited with launching the modern civil rights movement through disciplined consumer action—and the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 barring discrimination in public accommodations nationwide, politicized black consumers had already spent years agitating at the grassroots for, literally, a place at the table. That attacking segregation in public places became the focus of many local civil rights struggles after the war, particularly in the North, testified to the widespread appeal of the inclusive ideals of the Consumers' Republic. (2003, 166–67)

Thus, consumption reaches far beyond expressive behavior into the very constitution of American public politics (see also Frank 1994; Glickman 1997; Jacobs 1997).

At a smaller scale, but with no less effectiveness, anthropologist Daniel Miller has been likewise investigating the place of consumption in the constitution and maintenance of significant interpersonal relations. Miller (1987) has led the way in challenging the view of consumption as a form of subjugation and exploitation, emphasizing instead the creativity of consumers. In *A Theory of Shopping* (1998), Miller proposes a relational approach to consumption. Closely observing shopping practices of 76 households on and around Jay Road, a North London street, Miller found consumers, as he provocatively sums it up, "making love in supermarkets." Far from being "an expression of individual subjectivity and identity," shopping, Miller argues, serves as "an expression of kinship and other relationships" (35).

As Miller remarks, shopping can "best be understood as being about relationships and not about individuals" (2001, 41; see also Miller et al. 1998). Activities Miller includes are housewives selecting goods that will enhance their influence over the comportment of other household members, courting couples representing the current state of their relationship, and parents boosting the position of children within their peer groups. In a direct challenge to individualistic accounts of consumption, Miller provides evidence that sociability and purchasing of goods support each other, while isolation promotes withdrawal from consumption (1998, 34; 1995, 24).

Sociologists clearly have much to learn about consumption from scholars outside their discipline; in particular, historians and anthropologists have been proceeding quite independently to uncover the social implications and involvement of consumption behavior.

Sociological Studies of Consumption

Beginning with nineteenth-century concerns about the condition of the poor, from the first days of their discipline sociologists have dealt with consumption. They have, however, alternated between treatment of consumption as a process bearing heavily on the quality of life, and other interpretations of consumption as an expression of social position. Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1953); George Simmel ([1904] 1957), Robert and Helen Lynd (1929), Theodore Caplow, Paul Lazarsfeld (1957), David Riesman (1964), and David Caplowitz (1967) wrote important works in one vein or another (for an early effort linking studies of social stratification and consumption, see Barber 1957; for a programmatic statement not much followed, see Smelser 1963, 92–98; for a recent review, see Swedberg 2003, 241–58).

In recent decades, perhaps the most influential synthesis came from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu combined an ambitious theoretical program with a remarkable range of concrete studies of consumption practices, including photography ([1965] 1990) and housing markets (2000). Most notably, Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) introduced the ideas of cultural and social capital into the analysis of consumption. Instead of treating consumption as a straightforward reflection of class culture, Bourdieu represented occupants of different positions within fields of inequality as actively deploying their capital to enhance their own positions.

British sociologists, likewise responding to earlier class analyses, used consumption studies to examine patterns of inequality and cultural change within their own country. In these studies two currents emerged; one a post-Marxist effort to shift the focus of economic studies from production to consumption as a material experience, and the other, a more postmodern effort to treat consumption as an expression of consciousness and culture (see Campbell 1995; Slater 1997; for an attempt to link consumption, production, and distribution, see du Gay 1996).

Within North American sociology we find extensive consumption studies, but they remain remarkably fragmented, with various sociological specialists taking them up as part of other inquiries (see, e.g., Gottdiener 2000). Various dimensions of consumption have become mainly the province of specialists in family, class, gender, childhood, ethnicity, race, religion, community, the arts, and popular culture. Such talented analysts as Daniel Cook (2000), David Halle (1993), Gary Alan Fine (1996), Chandra Mukerji (1983), Michael Schudson (1984), Robert Wuthnow (1996), and Sharon Zukin (1991) have taken up topics varying from the creation of the "toddler" as a merchandising category, the purchase of art, the culture of restaurant work, circulation of mass consumer goods (pictorial prints, maps, and calicoes) in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century western Europe, to the impact of advertising, how Americans talk about their purchases, and Disney World as a "fantasy landscape." Meanwhile, George Ritzer (1996) has single-handedly initiated a somewhat separate analysis of what he calls "McDonaldization," pursuing the thesis that the spread of standardized fast food franchises creates uniform practices and understandings at a world scale (for qualifications, see Ritzer and Ovadia 2000; Ritzer 2003a, 2003b).

Thus, while there is a fair amount of consumption research in sociology, it remains segmented both within sociology and in terms of connections with consumption studies outside of sociology. For example, within the American Sociological Association, as of 2004, separate formal clusters existed for consumption, economic sociology, and the sociology of culture, drawing on vastly different constituencies and with little communication among the three (Cook 1999; see also Ritzer 2000).

Launched in 2001, the *Journal of Consumer Culture* (George Ritzer and Don Slater, editors) promised to bring together multidisciplinary European and North American work but not to bridge all other gaps. The prospectus for the new journal stressed a two-pronged program: first, the study of consumption as mediation and reproduction of culture and social structure, including that of class, second; consumer culture as a special feature of modernity and therefore a privileged prism for its examination (Ritzer and Slater 2001).

What of economic sociology itself?

How Consumption Studies Challenge Economic Sociology

Economic sociology's most prominent reader, *The Sociology of Economic Life* (2001), with 22 selections of what its two editors, Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, define as "the most inter-

esting work done in modern economic sociology" (19), barely touches on consumption. The closest instances are a famous article by Clifford Geertz (no economic sociologist) on bazaars, and an essay by Paul Hirsch on fads and fashions, which looks primarily at their production. Indeed, economic sociology grew up concentrating on production and distribution, rather than consumption.

The implicit intellectual strategy of economic sociology reinforced this emphasis. Three somewhat different approaches have characterized the field; we might call them extension, context, and alternative. They vary with respect to economics in two regards: their proximity to standard economic explanations, and their proximity to conventional economic subject matters (for elaboration of this argument see Zelizer 2001, 2002b).

Extension theorists apply relatively standard economic models to social phenomena economists themselves have not treated widely or effectively, for example household behavior, sporting competition, religious recruitment, and compliance with states. A *context* approach identifies features of social organization that work as facilitators or constraints on economic action. This position is intent on revamping economists' portrayals of individual and collective decision-making, for example by specifying conditions other than short-term gain that influence decisions. Advocates of context often speak of the "embeddedness" of economic phenomena in social processes, and often refer to interpersonal networks when they do so (see, e.g., Granovetter 1985; Granovetter and Soong 1986). Followers of this approach have focused on firms and different kinds of markets.

In the *alternative* perspective, sociologists propose competing accounts of economic transactions. Rather than expanding the economic approach or complementing it, one prominent view argues that in all areas of economic life people are creating, maintaining, symbolizing, and transforming meaningful social relations (see, e.g., Tilly and Tilly 1998; White 2002). As a result, the subject matter certainly includes firms and markets but also ranges over households, immigrant networks, informal economies, welfare transfers, or organ donations.

The first two orientations largely follow economists' own stress on production and distribution. The third deals more extensively with consumption, but without working out a consistent, comprehensive line of explanation.

A further barrier to the systematic study of consumption results from a common misunderstanding that cuts across the three different variants of economic sociology. Analysts of economic processes share a powerful view of a world split into two diametrically opposed spheres: a zone of markets and rationality, another of sentiment and meaning. In this *Hostile-Worlds* framework, production and distribution belong to the "real" economy, while consumption remains segregated into culture's expressive domain. Any contact between the two, in this view, produces contamination of one by the other: penetration of the cultural realm by the rationality of production and distribution taints its expressive and affectionate character, while the diffusion of sentiment into the world of economic rationality generates inefficiency, cronyism, and confusion.

Thus the Hostile-Worlds doctrine hinders analysis of interplay between the social relations of consumption and the processes of production and distribution. Some analysts have resolved this dualism by turning to *Nothing But* reductionist alternatives: consumption becomes nothing but a special case of economic rationality, a form of cultural expression, or an exercise of power. Thus, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard offers an extreme version of cultural reductionism:

> Consumer behavior, which appears to be focused and directed at the object and at pleasure, in fact responds to quite different objectives: the metaphoric or displaced expression of desire, and the production of a code of social values through the use of differentiating signs. That which is determinant is not the function of individual interest within a corpus of objects, but rather the specifically social functions of exchange, communication and distribution of values within a corpus of signs. (1999, 47; see also Bauman 1998, 79–85)

Neither Hostile-Worlds tropes nor Nothing-But simplifications will help us understand how consumption actually works. We need a different approach we might call Crossroads: identifying multiple forms of connections between complex social processes and their economic components.

Reaching such an intersection, we find two major forms of analysis dealing with consumption without crippling limitations. The first has a long pedigree in sociology. In the tradition of Veblen, it treats consumption as positional effort—establishment of social location, boundaries, and hierarchies through the display of goods and services. For example, Diana Crane casts a keen eye on class differences in clothing among nineteenth-century French men:

> Workers behaved as if they considered some type of fashionable items, such as gloves, canes, top hats and bowlers, as inappropriate for their own use. The reluctance to use these items cannot be explained by their expense. Workers' incomes were rising throughout the period. . . . Instead, the explanation may lie in the fact that these items required a greater understanding of standards of middle-class etiquette than other items. In this sense, these sartorial signs were effective in distinguishing between those who knew the "rules" and were able to follow them and those who did not. (2000, 62)

The second approach treats consumption as relational work—the creation, maintenance, negotiation, and alteration of interpersonal connections through acquisition and use of goods and services. Thus when Elizabeth Chin (2001) worked with ten-year-old, low-income black children in New Haven, she found that the children's purchases recurrently served to affirm relations with other members of their households.

Economic sociologists have recently built social relations firmly into the analysis of connections among Australian hotel managers, negotiations among New York City apparel manufacturers, purchases of consumer durables, consumption struggles in Chilean workers' households, and rotating savings and credit associations (see Ingram and Roberts 2000; Uzzi 1997; DiMaggio and Louch 1998; Stillerman 2004; Biggart 2001. For more general treatments of culture, social relations, and consumption, see DiMaggio 1990, 1994).

Summing up that trend, Nicole Woolsey Biggart and Richard P. Castanias (2001, 491–92) enumerate five characteristics of interplay between economic transactions and social relations:

1. Social relations should not be conflated with irrationality.
2. Social relations can facilitate exchange, not only act as an impediment or friction.
3. Social relations can manage the risks associated with exchange.
4. Actors can appropriate others' social relations for their own exploitation and gain.
5. While social relations may result from exchange, social relations may be prior to economic activity and be the very reason that the transaction takes place between given parties.

This welcome trend has not gone far enough. We must probe further into the negotiation of meaning, the transformation of relations in the course of economic interaction, and the social process of valuation itself. To do so, we need a junction between research being done outside of economic sociology and the work within the field. Our agenda, however, should not be to glue everything together, but to obtain a new theory of consumption organized around meaningful, negotiated social relations. Historical evidence, ethnographic accounts, and marketing studies all can help us clarify how precisely social relations operate in consumption.

That agenda will become more concrete as we examine three major sites of consumption: households, ethnic-racial communities, and retail settings. In each case, we scrutinize consumption relations from three different angles: within the site, across the site's boundaries, and with respect with variation and change in those sites. In each case, the argument will have a negative and a positive side. Negatively, it will reject the notions that consumption is a peripheral economic process, that it resides in a separate world of sentiment, or that it consists primarily in the acquisition rather than the use of goods and services. Positively, it will show the centrality of continuously negotiated and meaningful interpersonal relations in a wide range of consumption processes. Because consumption of services often involves activation or creation of interpersonal relations by definition, the following discussion will concentrate on the less obvious side: acquisition and use of goods.

Households as Sites of Consumption

In the case of the household, analysts long assumed it would remain, in Christopher Lasch's (1977) terms, a "haven in a heartless world," protecting its members from the harshness of markets. Instead, we find households to be central sites of production, distribution, and consumption. Researchers have amply established, furthermore, the complex internal diversity within household units and the incessant interplay between households and extrahousehold economic activities.

Marjorie DeVault's (1991) analysis of feeding work traces the profoundly social character of households' most fundamental economic activities. The largely invisible, unpaid labor of planning, shopping, and preparing meals involves constant, often contested, negotiations of family relationships. Drawing from her interviews of a diverse set of 30 households in the Chicago area, DeVault reports women—who do most of the feeding work within households—striving to match meals with

expected definitions of husband-wife or mother-child relationships. For example, appropriate meals for husbands involved enactment of deference to a man's preoccupations and responsibilities outside the household. Meals, DeVault demonstrates, involved more than nutrition or economy: they routinely symbolized appropriately gendered ties.

Food acquisition and preparation, however, inform a whole set of social relations beyond gender. DeVault provides a telling example of how Janice, a nurse living with her husband and two adult children, manages simultaneously to preserve both family cohesion and independence:

> Meals are often family events, prepared and eaten at home together. Janice or the children decide on the spur of the moment whether or not to cook, and "whoever is home sits down and eats it." Janice's shopping is what makes this kind of independence possible: "What I do is provide enough food in the house for anybody who wants to eat. And then whoever is home, makes that meal, if they want it." (1991, 63)

Each of her respondents, DeVault observes, "[t]hrough day-to-day activities . . . produces a version of 'family' in a particular local setting: adjusting, filling in, and repairing social relations to produce—quite literally—this form of household life" (1991, 91; for parallel observations on gay and lesbian households, see Carrington 1999).

To be sure, as DeVault shows, not all household relations of consumption generate harmony and collaboration. Consider another well-documented study. In his account of Philadelphia's inner-city poor African-American children Carl Nightingale (1993) reports acute rancor and conflict between parents and children in their negotiations over consumption. Parents exasperated by their kids' unreasonable and persistent demands for spending money are pitted against children disappointed by their parents' inability to provide them with material goods. Contests over how to spend limited family monies, including income tax refunds or welfare checks, Nightingale observes, severely strain household relations:

> All the kids whose families I knew well lived through similar incidents: yelling matches between Fahim and his mother on how she spent her welfare check, Theresa's disgust when she found out she was not going to get a dress because her mom's boyfriend had demanded some of the family's monthly money for crack, and Omar's decision to leave his mother's house altogether because "I hate her. She always be asking y'all [the Kids' Club] for money. That's going to get around, and people'll be talking." Also he felt that she never had enough money for his school clothes. (1993, 159; see also Bourgois 1995)

Thus, consumption within households takes place in a context of incessant negotiation, sometimes cooperative, other times full of conflict.

As DeVault's and Nightingale's studies illustrate, negotiations over consumption within the household regularly involve the parties in economic relations that cross the household's boundaries.

Consider the purchase of a home, a household's most significant investment. In their detailed investigation of how French households acquire their homes, Pierre Bourdieu's (2000) research team observed interactions and bargaining sessions between sellers and potential buyers in home shows, recorded conversations between sellers and buyers, and interviewed salespeople, merchandisers, and builders (for changes in the Chinese housing market, see Davis 2002).

Based on those observations, Bourdieu stresses the following points:

- The purchase of a home engages interactions not only between nominal buyer and seller, but among multiple parties: other household members, friends, credit agencies, and builders.
- In addition to these parties, the state always plays a crucial part as guarantor, and sometimes as a direct participant in the transaction.
- For household members, the purchase of a home represents simultaneously a deep financial commitment, a statement concerning the household's social position, the creation of space for household activities, and a series of commitments concerning futures of the households' members. As Bourdieu summarizes: a home is a "consumer good, which, because of its high cost, represents one of the most difficult economic decisions and one of the most consequential in the entire domestic life-cycle" (2000, 33).
- When it comes to buyer-seller negotiations, bargaining involves elements of manipulation along with personalization.
- A triple negotiation takes place over the purchase of a house: identification of the suitable home, establishment of credit, and working out a story of what the house will do for the buyer.
- The path that led to a particular seller often passed through the buyer's friends and neighbors.

Bourdieu concludes that the housing market, while profoundly structured by established political interests, legal limitations, financial constraints,

and its deep symbolic charge is, nevertheless, far from being a static, prescripted set of exchanges. Buyers and sellers' negotiations create unanticipated, often surprising outcomes. Bourdieu observes that a sale takes place

> only through a series of interactions, all of them unforeseen and aleatory—for example a couple who might have passed by, gone to another stand, or left saying they would return, actually find themselves signing a commitment. . . . Far from simply expressing the logic of the economic relation, the interaction actually creates that relation; it is always uncertain and its development is full of suspense and surprise. (2000, 210)

When Paul DiMaggio and Hugh Louch (1998) undertook their own investigation of how Americans acquired consumer durables, including homes, their findings pointed in the same direction as Bourdieu's. Analyzing a general survey of the American population, they looked closely at reports of recent major purchases.

As they examined preexisting noncommercial ties between buyers and sellers in consumer transactions involving the purchase of cars, homes, as well as legal and home repair services, DiMaggio and Louch found a remarkably high incidence of what they call within-network exchanges. Contrary to the notion of an impersonal market, a substantial number of such transactions took place not between strangers but among kin, friends, or acquaintances. Noting that this pattern applies primarily to risky one-shot transactions involving high uncertainty about quality and performance, DiMaggio and Louch conclude that consumers will be more likely to rely on such noncommercial ties when they are unsure about the outcome.

These close-up studies by DeVault, Bourdieu, DiMaggio, and Louch give us a keen sense of the importance of interpersonal ties in household consumption. They naturally provide little information, however, about larger-scale change and variation in the character of those ties. For that kind of information we must turn to another style of research. Following the trails blazed by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000), Caroline Humphrey (1995), Alena Ledeneva (1998), and Katherine Verdery, Daphne Berdahl (1999) has used her sustained ethnography in Kella, an East German border village, to pursue a double comparison; between East and West Germany under separate regimes, and in East Germany before and after unification.

Among other things, Berdahl shows that interpersonal and interhousehold networks played a critical part in mutual aid under East Germany's socialist regime. Household consumption was at the very center of those exchanges. In conditions of great scarcity, as they obtained food products, clothing, and other household goods, Kella villagers depended less on available cash than on their personal connections. As one woman explained to Berdahl: "Money actually did help you: it helped maintain the connections! But the connections were most important" (1999, 120). In this informal economy, Berdahl reports "networks of friendships, acquaintances, and associates were created and maintained through gift exchange, bribes, and barter trade" (118). The type of transfer, furthermore, differed by the nature of the relationship (see Rose-Ackerman 1998 and Zelizer 1998). While gifts and barter took place among friends, kin, and acquaintances, bribes were reserved for more distant connections:

> Slipping the local grocery clerk an extra twenty marks or a western chocolate bar meant that she would probably set aside a few bananas or green peppers under the counter whenever a shipment of these or other coveted fruits and vegetables came in. A homemade wurst could guarantee being bumped to the top of the waiting list of the driving school. (Berdahl 1999, 119)

After the fall of the Wall, Berdahl suggests, consumption practices and relations were transformed. In the new market economy, as money became a greater mediator of personal relationships, informal networks lost much of their importance in providing access to consumer goods. However, consumption did not lose its importance. The character and quantity of goods and services—especially visibly expensive ones—consumed by a household, Berdahl argues, became an even greater point of distinction among households.

The very richness of Berdahl's ethnography raises the question of whether networks have actually shriveled or instead, changed in character, as seems more likely. In any case, Berdahl's close observation provides a model for the examination of variation and change in household consumption.

Consumption in Ethnic and Racial Communities

In history and the social sciences a great deal of attention has gone into ethnic production, especially in the form of sweatshops, labor market segregation, and the informal economy. Ethnic consumption has received somewhat less attention.

Any discussion of consumption in ethnic and racial communities, however, plays out against two general debates; one, the relative merits of assimilation versus multiculturalism, the second concerning bases of ethnic and racial inequality (for convenience the remainder of this discussion will use *ethnic communities* to signal both race and national origin). More specific debates surrounding ethnic consumption pivot on the following issues: does consumption trump ethnic solidarities by homogenizing tastes, or is consumption a means for asserting ethnic identities? Are all ethnic groups equally competent consumers, or do some ethnic populations require education? Does consumer culture oppress and exploit relatively impoverished, powerless ethnic groups, or can consumption subvert domination?

To some extent market researchers avoid these moral and political questions; they commonly seek to explain or influence the purchases by members of different demographic categories (see, e.g., Turow 1997; Schreiber 2001; Venkatesh 1995; Weiss 1988; for similar processes among gay and lesbian consumers, see Badgett 2001). In history and the social sciences, however, the discussion of consumption in ethnic communities rarely proceeds without these pressing issues in the background.

Thus, energy and imagination pour into a wide range of analyses concerning consumption in ethnic communities. As with households, this discussion will move from internal consumption practices to relations between ethnic communities and other sites, then close with change and variation among ethnic communities.

What is distinctive about ethnic communities? They have two special characteristics: first, their reinforcement through residential, labor market, and linguistic segregation and second, the frequent feeding of major segments of their population by extensive migration streams. Segregation not only sharpens the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, but also intensifies communication within the boundaries and establishes populations that share a common fate. Shared migration streams produce their own characteristic clusters of social relations, their own cultural practices, and their own lines of communication to fellow migrants elsewhere as well as to their place of origin. As Charles Tilly (1990, 84) puts it: "networks migrate; categories stay put; and networks create new categories."

All of these traits have strong implications for the culture of consumption. Let us concentrate on four salient ways in which this works within ethnic communities: first, members of the community (for example, first-generation migrants) often maintain their community's internal representation through consumption goods and practices; second, consumption marks distinctions within the ethnic community, for example young/old, male/female, rich/poor, religious/nonreligious; third, households use ethnic forms of consumption to maintain their position within the community; fourth, some members of the ethnic community—ethnic entrepreneurs—specialize in retailing ethnic merchandise representing their community.

Ewa Morawska's classic study of Eastern European immigrants and their descendants in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, shows us all four sorts of process at work. Johnstown's Slovaks, Magyars, Croatians, Serbs, Slovenes, Poles, Ukrainians, and Rusyns had members who attempted to maintain group identity and solidarity through consumption, marked their internal differences through consumption, employed ethnic involvements to meet their consumption needs, and hosted entrepreneurs who made their business the interfaces among production, distribution, and consumption. In hard times, the third process provided the means of survival. As Morawska puts it, Johnstown's ethnic communities used their connections to seek or preserve the good life:

> These options included the search, through kinship and ethnic networks, for a better job: if possible, better-skilled, as there appeared in the mills more of the mechanized tasks; if not, then more remunerative, either within the same or another Bethlehem department or with a different local manufacturer. They included, too, overtime work and moonlighting at night and during weekends. They also involved increasing the total family income by entering into the labor market all employable members of the household, keeping boarders, renting out part of a newly purchased house, reducing household expenditures through extensive reliance on home production of food from gardens and domestic animals, on women's abilities to prepare and preserve food and to sew and weave, and on men's old-country skills in carpentry, masonry, and other household repairs. (1985, 185–86)

Thus consumption did not merely reproduce, amuse, and satisfy members of Johnstown's ethnic communities. It helped them organize their social lives.

Of course, the four consumption processes often intersect. For instance, Kathy Peiss's (1998) study of the cosmetic industry in the United States provides clear indications of African-American entre-

preneurship, gender distinctions within the African-American community, as well as showing the significance of the beauty culture for maintaining black solidarity. Peiss reports how, between the 1890s and 1920s, black women, along with immigrant and working-class women, pioneered the cosmetic industry. Successful African-American female entrepreneurs, such as Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone, Peiss notes, "embedded the beauty trade in the daily life of black communities linked by kin, neighbors, churches, and schools" (90). Indeed, the beauty business both depended and reinforced customers' social connections:

> Word of hair growers and shampoos made by African-American women spread rapidly. Women convinced each other to try these new products, buying boxes of glossine and hair grower for relatives and friends, practicing the art of hairdressing on each other. Like many women, Elizabeth Clark placed an order with Madam Walker "not for my self" but "for a friend of mine." For these businesses, word of mouth was the finest form of advertising. (1998, 90)

The women's connections went well beyond mutual grooming. Some cosmetic entrepreneurs in fact involved themselves, their agents, and their customers in public politics. Madam Walker, for instance, not only supported her agents' participation in African-American community affairs but encouraged their political activism. Walker herself, Peiss notes, backed the politically militant National Equal Rights League and the International League of Darker Peoples. As Peiss observes: "commercial beauty culture was something much more than an isolated act of consumption or vanity. In the hands of African-American women entrepreneurs, it became an economic and aesthetic form that spoke to black women's collective experiences and aspirations" (1998, 95).

Consumption also builds connections between ethnic communities and the rest of the world. In fact, ethnic entrepreneurs often specialize in mediating between their communities and producers, distributors, or consumers outside. While doing a splendid job of portraying the internal consumption practices of Mexican immigrants in early-twentieth-century Los Angeles, George Sánchez (1993) also shows such entrepreneurs at work.

Examining the lively Mexican music industry during the 1920s, Sánchez reports ethnic middlemen's crucial role in linking promising local musicians with American recording industries (for a pioneering statement on how cultural industries operate see Hirsch 1972).

For instance, Mauricio Calderón, a noted entrepreneur and owner of the music store Repertorio Musical Mexicana,

> recruited talented musicians by advertising in the Spanish-language press, and kept an ear out for the latest musical trends among the city's performers and audiences. Not only did Calderón make money by serving as go-between between American companies and the Mexican artists, but he also held a monopoly on the area-wide distribution of these recordings through his store. (Sánchez 1993, 182)

Within the community, Calderón likewise merchandised Mexican music; for example by giving records away with purchases of a Victrola, or by playing corridas—one of the most popular musical styles—from a loudspeaker in front of his store: "a small group of men regularly stood in front of the store, listening intently and enjoying the music" (Sánchez 1993, 182).

But that was not all. Mexican-American brokers sustained a flow of musicians into Los Angeles from Mexico; they supplied music for Mexican street festivals, weddings, and other ethnic celebrations. They also exported Mexican music to Anglo festivities, as a reminder of the city's Spanish past. Pedro González, later a renowned musician, recalled playing at events sponsored by city officials and the fire department.

What is more, between the 1920s and 1930s, Spanish-language radio became a major link among entrepreneurs, Mexican immigrants, and the Anglo world. For example, Calderón and other Chicano middlemen, reports Sánchez, "profited handsomely as they negotiated with stations, paying them a flat rate during cheap broadcasting time, which they then sold to businesses advertisements" (Sánchez 1993, 183). Mexican immigrants tuned into the radio shows during early morning hours as they prepared for work, enjoying the music but also receiving crucial job information.

Behind all this cultural activity lay the work of Mexican-American entrepreneurs, who

> served as conduits between the Mexican immigrant population and the corporate world. These individuals were often the first to recognize cultural changes and spending patterns among the immigrant population. Individuals such as Mauricio Calderón and Pedro J. González were able to promote Mexican music in entirely new forms in Los Angeles because they had daily contact with ordinary members of the Los Angeles Mexican community. Although they found tangible financial rewards in their efforts, they also served

> an important role in redefining Mexican culture in an American urban environment. (Sánchez 1993, 187)

Thus, ethnic entrepreneurship fed on swelling migration of Mexicans to Los Angeles, strengthening ties between Mexican and Californian cultures (for a variety of ethnic entrepreneurs and marketers, see Lamont and Molnár 2001; Nightingale 1993; Pérez Firmat 1994; Portes and Stepick 1993; Weems 1994).

Immigrant remittances similarly strengthen ties between places of origin and destination (Roberts and Morris 2003). Remittances show us, furthermore, that not all ethnic entrepreneurs stay fixed within their communities (on transnationalism see Portes 2001; Portes, Haller, and Guarnizo 2002). Sarah Mahler's (1995, 142–44) study of undocumented Salvadoran immigrants in Long Island clarifies their reliance on personal couriers for conveying goods and cash to and from their homeland. Personal couriers take their place among a variety of media for transmitting back and forth between El Salvador and Long Island: the U.S. Postal Service, Western Union–style specialized remittance organizations, and local multipurpose agencies. They carry not only money but gifts of food and clothing, including "Corn Flakes, CD players, soccer shoes . . . brand-new jeans and T-shirts" and even love notes for distant sweethearts" (Moreno 2001, B1).

Goods and services flow in both directions: Salvadoran residents supply their migrant relatives with local medicines and food: "they might bring a box stuffed with mom's grilled chicken to a lonely son or a fresh pot of mango spread to a granddaughter" (Moreno 2001, B1). Some migrants, Mahler (1995, 143) reports, "waited weeks to receive salves or pills from home instead of seeking costly medical care and prescription drugs here."

The Salvadoran remitters face a double relational problem: exchanging resources with distant family members, and establishing reliable ties with the intermediaries. The *viajeros* (couriers) establish personal relations with both senders and receivers, thus building the trustworthiness (*confianza*) of the connection. Couriers, observes Mahler (1995, 143), "seal their transactions with handshakes, not receipts." In earlier conditions of civil war, Salvadoran couriers filled in where official transactions had no power to operate.

In the Salvadoran case, senders and recipients are connected by intermediaries. In other cases, donors actually deliver money, goods, and services themselves. For example, any flight from New York City to Central America or the Caribbean—most dramatically on holidays—carries numerous migrants who are returning to their place of origin with household goods and other gifts. On their return trip, travelers usually have lighter baggage, but have stocked up on their favorite homeland products.

Peggy Levitt (2001a) describes how this transnational economy operates. In her close observation of ties between Miraflores, a Dominican Republic town, and the Boston, Massachusetts, neighborhood of Jamaica Plains where many of their relatives migrated, Levitt notes that "fashion, food, and forms of speech, as well as appliances and home decorating styles, attest to these strong connections":

> In Miraflores, villagers often dress in T-shirts emblazoned with the names of businesses in Massachusetts, although they do not know what these words or logos mean. They proudly serve their visitors coffee with Cremora and juice made from Tang. (2001a, 2)

Nonmigrant Dominicans, in turn, often provide migrants with child care, supervise their local affairs, and treat them as "royal guests" during visits. Forty-year-old Cecilia, with three siblings in Boston, "wants to give something back to her brothers and sisters, but she is exhausted when they leave" (Levitt 2001a, 90). Levitt points out that narrowly economic interchange is only part of the remittance flow; she calls attention to what she calls "social remittances," the transfer of "ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from host-to sending-country communities" (54). Social and material remittances, however, do not constitute separate streams; in both cases people are fashioning and refashioning meaningful social relations, in some cases with consumer goods, in others with belief systems, social practices, or network connections. (On how remittance systems connect to bargaining within households, see Curran and Saguy 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991.)

Collectively, remittances are consequential transfers, with large macroeconomic impact. For instance, in 1994, almost 40 percent of Miraflores's households reported that between 75 and 100 percent of their income came from remittances. Nearly 60 percent of those households reported receiving some monthly income from migrant relatives (Levitt 2001b, 200). Official estimates of national totals surely understate their true value. Nevertheless, for the Dominican Republic as a whole, the 1996 count was of $1.14 billion, while for Mexico, the official figure was $2 billion (Waller Meyers

1998; see also de la Garza and Lindsay Lowell 2002; Pew Hispanic Center 2003).

Finally, while participants and observers of remittance systems often deplore the fact that a good deal of expenditure goes into consumer display rather than productive investment, Durand, Parrado, and Massey (1996) demonstrate that in fact consumption creates large demand for both local and national producers. Even what they call "migradollars" earned by immigrants, and spent for food, drink, music, or fireworks in apparently "wasteful" local Mexican festivities, spur regional production and income. Durand, Parrado, and Massey estimate that, at the national level, the $2 billion migradollars generate $6.5 billion additional production in Mexico.

Holiday celebrations, in fact, provide an entrée to the comparative analysis of ethnic consumption. Consider this selection from the mid–nineteenth century's vast assortment of local civic holidays reported by Leigh Schmidt (1995, 33–34): New York City's republican Evacuation Day, Irish Catholics' St. Patrick's Day, Scots' St. Andrew's Day, patrician Knickerbockers' St. Nicholas's Day, New Englander's Pilgrim Day, Charlestown's Bunker Hill Day. "Ethnic particularity, eclecticism, and localism," Schmidt notes, "seemed to impede national observances at every turn" (33). Yet, by the end of the century national holiday traditions had been installed, largely propelled by the expansion of a consumerist economy and culture. Merchants, recognizing the commercial potential of holiday celebrations, displayed, promoted, and in the process nationalized both holiday observances and material symbols, such as the mass-produced greeting cards, Valentine Cupids and hearts, Santa Clauses, or chocolate Easter bunnies. "The consumer culture," Schmidt concludes, "more than folk tradition, local custom, or religious community, increasingly provided the common forms and materials for American celebrations" (297).

Yet, as with other consumer goods, people and groups, even as they shared in the increasingly nationalized, standardized, consumer-oriented celebrations, found ways to simultaneously particularize their holidays. Mary Waters (1990) has shown that contemporary Americans attach themselves to symbolic ethnicity by means of holiday celebrations, foods, and other representations of their origins. This process was already well under way a half-century ago. By the 1920s, for instance, American Jews revitalized the languishing holiday of Chanukah into what Jenna Joselit (1994, 229) calls a "functional equivalent" to Christmas, shopping for and exchanging gifts (see also Heinze 1990). Even the Christmas Club savings concept was adapted to Chanukah: "Save For Chanukah" ads by the East River Savings Institution appeared in Yiddish newspapers—although printed in Yiddish, the ads pictured a young couple standing next to a Christmas tree (Joselit 1994, 234, and personal communication). Once again, merchandisers picked up the cue, creating specialized products and connections for the Chanukah market. Toy manufacturers, for instance, produced

> Jewish-oriented novelties that ran the gamut from pinwheels and board games . . . to cookie cutters shaped like a Jewish star and oversized dreidels like the four-foot-tall "Maccabee." A creation of the Dra-Dell Corporation of Bergen, New Jersey, this object "expresses a true holiday spirit in the home . . . and is a fine addition to the Chanukah atmosphere" . . . these objects reflected the needs of a new community of Jewish consumers: children. (Joselit 1994, 80–81)

Christmas also changed. In earlier United States history, as Karal Ann Marling (2000, 256–76) points out, one of the most remarkable developments was the integration of African-Americans into public representations of Christmas. By the 1960s, however, African-Americans fashioned their own December holiday of Kwanzaa, drawing not only from Christmas, but also from African harvest festivals, Chanukah, and New Year's Eve. Elizabeth Pleck sums up the holiday's origins:

> Kwanzaa was a nationalist—specifically, black nationalist—holiday and had a specific creator [Ron (Maudana) Karenga], who designed it as a celebration of the African harvest, with the intention that American blacks, in exile from their African homeland, would continue traditions and celebrate their African heritage. (2000, 6)

Although Kwanzaa was intended to counter the commercial orientation of dominant holidays, by the early 1980s it had incorporated consumerism in its practice; the production of videos and books, Kwanzaa greeting cards and wrapping paper, cookbooks, along with Afrocentric clothes, artwork, jewelry, and music (Schmidt 1995, 300–301; Austin 1996). Recent Indian immigrants likewise construct dual holiday celebrations; one study reports Indian immigrant families celebrating Thanksgiving with turkey and stuffing combined with curries and other Indian foods (Mehta and Belk 1991, 407). Armenian families, meanwhile, serve their Thanksgiving turkey with rice pilaf, boreog, and stuffed vine leaves (Bakalian 1993, 366: see also

Gabaccia 1998; Halter 2000; Light and Gold 2000).

Clearly, across ethnic communities, culture, social relations, and consumption vary and change together in dramatic fashion.

Retail Settings for Consumption

Nor does culture disappear from retail settings. On the contrary, a surprising degree of cultural work goes on within and among retail establishments—places where consumers purchase goods and services. In fact, people engage in three somewhat different types of relational activity in such settings. They acquire goods and services for other people, engage in sociable interactions with fellow customers and retail personnel, and display group memberships and differences from other people by means of their purchases.

Our earlier discussion of shopping malls, however, indicated that observers have often interpreted the expansion of retail trade as promoting commodification, thereby destroying earlier forms of meaningful social connections. Bidding up Robert Putnam, social critic Jeremy Rifkin (2000, 155), for instance, declares shopping malls' "central mission" to be "the commodification of lived experiences in the form of the purchase of goods and entertainment." Commodification, in this account, substitutes impersonal rationality for the rich, sentimental connections of earlier ages.

Yet, as we have already seen, people construct and refashion meaningful social relations across a wide variety of commercial settings. To be sure, major changes in retailing did occur from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries: a larger proportion of all goods and services arrive through commercial transactions, the scale and geographic concentration of retail establishments has increased, and the direct sale and delivery of goods and services to households has declined (Cowan 1983). Households, therefore, found themselves much more heavily engaged in external shopping than had once been true. At first glance, moreover, a series of innovations in retailing, for example, the one-price system, self-service, and the substitution of credit cards for local account books, seemed to replace personalized connections with impersonal routines. In fact, within the retail setting, each of these altered the terms of social interaction but without eliminating personal contact between merchant and customer. The effects of these multiple changes in retail practice, then, were never to obliterate meaningful social relations, but to alter their character and geography significantly.

Paralleling the previous discussions, this section will examine retail settings in three steps: first, relations within retail establishments, then, relations across boundaries, and, finally, change and variation.

For culturally informed social relations within retail settings, consider restaurants. In their study of food consumption outside the home in England during the 1990s, Alan Warde and Lydia Martens (2000, 108) discovered that, paradoxically, "eating out is more convivial than eating at home" (see also Illouz 1997, chap. 4). Using interviews and a survey, they found that most of their 1,001 respondents ate out with family members. Other frequent dining companions were friends and romantic partners. In fact only 2 percent reported being alone the last time they had eaten out. However, eating out did make some difference, since the effort of preparing the meal did not fall on women, as characteristically happens in households. Eating outside of the home thus provides the opportunity for a more equal exchange around the table.

What is more, eating out might even generate greater sociability than dining at home. As one respondent, Trisha, put it:

> I think it's easier, when you're sat over a meal, to talk about things. Probably if you're sat with a take-away you tend to be glued to the telly, whereas rather if you're just sat together over a meal you do tend to have a better conversation really because you haven't as many distractions and things like that, it's quite nice. You know, it's socialising involved especially with your boyfriend. (Warde and Martens 2000, 205)

Yet one might think that any sort of social interaction vanishes in the world of fast foods. After all, Edward Hopper's emblematic painting of a diner, *Nighthawks*, shows each customer and a counterman staring silently into private spaces. In the modern equivalent of the diner, the fast food palace, however, Robin Leidner (1993) observes a steady flow of social interaction between customers and serving personnel. McDonald's, of course, represents the paradigm of an impersonal, routinized consumer world. Indeed, George Ritzer (1996) has made McDonald's the central symbol of economic standardization in the world of consumption. Drawing on her fieldwork at a McDonald's franchise near Chicago, Leidner reports extensive organizational scripting of work routines, ranging from food preparation to worker-consumer interaction. The Six Steps of Window Service, for instance, closely guide workers' behav-

ior: "(1) greet the customer, (2) take the order, (3) assemble the order, (4) present the order, (5) receive payment, and (6) thank the customer and ask for repeat business" (Leidner 1993, 68) More significantly, as Leidner shows, the rules standardized "attitudes and demeanors as well as words and actions" (73).

However, anyone who enjoys ballroom dancing, tennis, or chess knows that routinized interaction need not be impersonal. There are two fallacies to avoid: first, the notion that standardization of interpersonal relations necessarily destroys human contact; and second, the contrary view that all social interaction is intrinsically satisfying. As Leidner discovered: "despite the specificity of the script and the brevity of most encounters with customers, the service interactions were not all alike and were not necessarily devoid of personal involvement" (1993, 136). Workers enjoyed their albeit brief conversations or jokes with customers, occasionally providing some customers with extra services.

Regular customers, meanwhile, often established ongoing ties with workers. As Matthew told Leidner:

> What I like [is that] when you work window you get to know every customer that come in here every day. You get to remember their faces, you get to know what they want . . . and all they have to [do is] just show their faces, and you just grab the tray and set up everything they need, 'cause they get everything the same every day. (Leidner 1993, 141)

Personalized interactions, however, were not all cordial. Partly because of the low status of their jobs, workers were sometimes subjected to customers' "rude, sarcastic, and insulting remarks" (Leidner 1993, 132). In such cases, the interactive script broke down: the worker "might withhold smiles, risk a show of impatience or irritation with a customer, or refuse to suggest additional purchases or to encourage return business" (135; Katherine Newman [1999] reported similar interactions in New York's Harlem). Furthermore, some workers actually welcomed the protection provided by routinized interactions. The point is that whether friendly, hostile, or strictly limited, the participants were engaging in negotiated, meaningful social interactions (for discussions of conflicts between blacks and shopkeepers, see Austin 1994; Lee 2002).

The custom of thinking about retail settings as self-contained locations makes the thought of cross-cutting ties hard to manage at first. However, if we consider a retail setting to be any location in which people purchase goods and services, this immediately calls to mind, among others, supermarkets, shopping malls, department stores, country stores, video stores, garage sales, street fairs, junk shops, pawnshops, thrift shops, restaurants, coffee shops, airport shops, bookstores, newsstands, fashion outlets, automobile dealerships, art galleries, movies, theaters, and mom-and-pop stores. In all of these retail sites, relations of both consumers and merchants to such groups as neighbors, friends, households, police, protesters, looters, gangs, credit agencies, labor unions, courts, and so on, play a significant part in their operations.

Rather than focusing on the more obvious cases of department stores or supermarkets, let us take two challenging sites: pawnshops and direct-selling organizations. In both cases, we observe the intersection of an active retail setting with webs of social relations that extend far beyond that site.

The pawnshop is a remarkable device, a sort of bank that lends cash against the security of saleable objects. Pawnbrokers must develop great skills in judging other people and establishing trustworthy relations with them. With the expansion of wage labor and purchased commodities during the nineteenth century, the pawnshop became a crucial institution in working-class communities across the Western world. In the United States, Lendor Calder (1999, 43) notes, "a wide variety of people found their way into pawnshops, including salesmen and travelers with emergency needs for cash, and petty shopkeepers in need of a quick loan to pay off creditors." Commonly pawned objects ranged from items of clothing and jewelry, to musical instruments, bedding, guns, household furniture, and more exceptionally coffins, false teeth, and even automobiles (44).

Among the wide range of customers, households often balanced short-run fluctuations in their budgets by pawning or redeeming household objects. In her account of housewives' economic strategies among the London poor between 1870 and 1918, Ellen Ross reports women's extensive reliance on pawnshops to make ends meet: "COS [Charity Organisation Society] caseworkers investigating the assets of households applying for aid were invariably shown bundles of pawn tickets by the women with whom they spoke. . . . Lent, stolen, or honestly obtained pledge tickets were transferred and traded in complex patterns among groups of women" (1993, 82; see also Tebbutt 1983).

Women developed specialized bargaining skills, knowing which shops gave better value to their

pledges; so much so that thieves regularly relied on women to serve as their intermediaries with pawnbrokers. While recounting his long life to Raphael Samuel during the 1970s, retired East London petty criminal, cabinetmaker, and furniture merchant Arthur Harding recalled a time before World War I:

> There was a woman in nearly every street of the East End of London who got a living taking neighbours' things to the pawn shop. The pawn-shop broker would lend her more than he would an ordinary customer on the goods because he knew that she would get 'em out again on Saturday—he trusted her. He didn't want to be lumbered up with a shop-load of stuff that wasn't going to be redeemed. He'd sooner do business with her, than a person who fetched a load of stuff in there and didn't intend to redeem 'em. (Samuel 1981, 90)

Indeed, women fashioned particularized relations with pawnbrokers' clerks. Ross reports a son describing his mother's negotiating skills:

> One went into a cubicle where the gent behind the counter usually knew his customers. "How much?" were his first words. "Ten shillings," says Mum. "Seven," said the gent behind the counter. "Oh Christ," says Mum. "Don't be like that, Sid." "All right," says Sid. "I'll make it eight bob, but don't forget it's the last time I take this lot in." (Ross 1993, 83)

Pawnshops still thrive in Western cities today. With sharpening income inequality and partial deregulation of banking, America's pawnshops, after a decline between 1930 and 1970, have multiplied since the 1980s. From a low of 4,849 in 1985, they climbed to 14,000 over the next 15 years (Manning 2000, 203). That number produced the highest per capita concentration of pawnshops in American history (Caskey 1994, 1). According to John Caskey, the customers of today's American pawnshops have low or moderate incomes, and are drawn especially from the African-American and Hispanic populations. Typical jobs include "an enlisted person in the military, a nonunion factory worker, a nurse's aid, a retail sales clerk, or a general helper in an automobile service station." Caskey reports that usually, loans cover such expenses as paying rent or a vacation, buying Christmas presents, food, alcohol, illegal drugs, lottery tickets, fixing a car, or buying gasoline (69–70). Loan customers usually lack access to credit cards and routine banking. Pawnshops thus serve as their alternative banks.

On the average, direct selling involves a somewhat more prosperous segment of the population; across the world, a wide variety of customers purchase goods not directly from stores, but from friends, neighbors, and kin who bring the goods to their home. Sometimes, rather than individual door-to-door sales, direct selling involves the creation of special social settings within homes. As Nicole Woolsey Biggart says in her classic study, direct-selling organizations counter the idea that efficiency depends on bureaucratized impersonality:

> Executives in the direct selling industry understand, just as do the leaders of many social movements, the power of preexisting social relations and networks in recruiting distributors and channeling their actions. . . . In direct selling social bonds are not an encumbrance but an instrument for soliciting and controlling a sales force and for appealing to customers. (1989, 167; see also Frenzen and Davis 1990)

Following up on Biggart's leads, British scholar Alison Clarke's (1999) analysis of Tupperware illustrates the particular intersection of retail trade with households. In the 1950s, Earl Tupper, inventor of the now emblematic airtight plastic containers, withdrew his products from retail outlets, launching the "Tupperware party" marketing strategy. Dealers went to a volunteer "hostess" home, first demonstrating, and then selling, their products to a gathering of friends and neighbors. For her efforts, the hostess received a Tupperware gift product contingent on the amount of sales. At the party, dealers recruited future hostesses, encouraging them as well to join up as commission-paid dealers. In the process, homes became intensely social retail outlets, as well as recruiting grounds for commercial operations. Tupper's marketing strategy worked. By 1997, according to Clarke, worldwide net sales were of $1.2 billion, and about 118 million people had attended a Tupperware demonstration (2).

Direct-selling organizations changed over time and varied significantly in their organizational strategies. Biggart stresses three axes of change and variation: first, the gender of salespeople, which differentiated the kinds of networks they activated; second, the degree of orientation within the organization to a single charismatic leader (e.g., Mary Kay Ash for Mary Kay cosmetics); finally, the extent of bureaucratization and differentiation, for example, the degree to which successful salespeople became full-time managers and recruiters.

Let us think of change and variation in retail settings at an international scale. Global fast food chains and electronic commerce provide two cur-

rent settings in which many observers have thought that uniformity and impersonality were locked into place. Despite Leidner's demonstration of intensive social interaction within U.S. fast food outlets, a number of critics have interpreted the worldwide spread of McDonald's and other chains as the imposition of uniform impersonal forms of consumption on alien cultures. Political theorist Benjamin Barber (1995), for instance, goes so far as to portray a cosmic struggle between Jihad and McWorld, pitting the forces of religious and ethnic fragmentation against the inexorable economic homogenization of the world. Using fast food as a symbol of a much broader world conquest, Barber declares,

> Music, video, theater, books, and theme parks—the new churches of a commercial civilization in which malls are the public squares and suburbs the neighborless neighborhoods—are all constructed as image exports creating a common world taste around common logos, advertising slogans, stars, songs, brand names, jingles, and trademarks. (1995, 17)

Looked at closely, however, despite common top-down designs, fast food restaurants turn out to vary dramatically in actual social process from one locality to another. An international team of anthropologists has studied consumer behavior in McDonald's outlets across five East Asian cities. Although they certainly see an impact on local cuisine and practices, they do not observe the homogenization that many critics have feared. On the contrary, they identify a process of "localization," integrating McDonald's into different cultural settings (for various types of localization, see also Appadurai 1990; Barron 1997; Caldwell 2004; Cohen 1990; Fantasia 1995; Goody 1998; Howes 1996; Kuisel 1993; Lozada 2000; Patillo-McCoy 1999; Peiss 2002; Stephenson 1989; Warde 2000; Yan 2000). Summing up, James L. Watson says,

> East Asian consumers have quietly, and in some cases stubbornly, transformed their neighborhood McDonald's into local institutions. . . . In Beijing, Seoul, and Taipei, for instance, McDonald's restaurants are treated as leisure centers, where people can retreat from the stresses of urban life. In Hong Kong, middle school students often sit in McDonald's for hours, studying, gossiping, and picking over snacks; for them, the restaurants are the equivalent of youth clubs. (1997, 6–7)

If fast food does not stamp out local culture, what about electronic commerce? After all, at first glance electronically mediated consumption appears to reduce social interaction to its barest minimum. At any particular site, all an observer sees is a shopper and a computer interacting.

However, as in all our previous cases of culture and consumption, we find people creating, confirming, and transforming their social relations as they consume (on social relations in electronic communication, see DiMaggio et al. 2001; Miller and Slater 2000; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). Take the case of Lands' End—the leading online apparel retail site. Malcolm Gladwell (1999) found customer-service representatives routinely engaged in online chats with customers. In one instance, an East Coast woman he calls Carol was trying to decide on what color to pick for an attaché case:

> Darcia [the rep] was partial to the dark olive. . . . Carol was convinced, but she wanted the case monogrammed and there were eleven monogramming styles on the Web-site page. "Can I have a personal suggestion?" she wrote. "Sure," Darcia typed back. "Who is the case for?" "A conservative psychiatrist," Carol replied. Darcia suggested block initials, in black. Carol agreed, and sent the order in herself on the Internet. "All right," Darcia said, as she ended the chat. "She feels better." The exchange had taken twenty-three minutes. (Gladwell 1999, 5–6)

"It's a mistake," concludes Gladwell, "to think that E-commerce will entirely automate the retail process. It just turns reps from order-takers into sales advisers." Indeed, Bill Bass, head of Lands' End e-commerce, told Gladwell: "One of the big fallacies when the Internet came along was that you could get these huge savings by eliminating customer-service costs . . . [but] people still have questions, and what you are getting are much higher-level questions. Like, 'Can you help me come up with a gift?' And they take longer" (Gladwell 1999, 6).

Electronic commerce does not merely present opportunities for sociability. Like other forms of consumption, it also presents problems of trust. When people purchase expensive or potentially harmful goods and services on line, they regularly seek reassurance through three social strategies that apply broadly across the whole range of consumption: by repeated interaction with the supplier; by identifying reliable suppliers through mutual ties to third parties; and by creation or consultation of monitoring agencies. All three rely on or create more trustworthy cultural knowledge, thus converting uncertainty into manageable risk.

Looking at the giant electronic emporium eBay, Peter Kollock (1999) finds that despite vast numbers of transactions and no central guarantees of quality or delivery, the default rate for trades is minimal. According to a 1997 eBay report, for instance, only 27 out of 2 million auctions that took place between May and August 1997 appeared to be fraudulent. Users prevent fraud by a series of practical procedures: first, they establish a verifiable identity for each buyer and seller; second, they post summaries of reports from previous trading partners concerning the reliability of each trader; third, groups of users create websites posting advice (including information about frequent traders) for the pursuit of trustworthy exchanges; and fourth, some participants station themselves as paid or voluntary advisers for less experienced traders. As Kollock sums up: "at least for the core users, this is not a market of atomized price-takers" (118) It is a connected web of consumers creating a distinctive set of cultural links and producing trust by recognizable social strategies.

Similar findings emerge from Laura Sartori's (2002) large Italian study of Internet users from 1998 to 2001 (on electronic commerce in Australia see Singh 1999, in England, Pahl 1999). The study as a whole included a household survey, an online questionnaire, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. Sartori sees electronic consumption as actually increasing the autonomy and effectiveness of consumers because it makes substantial amounts of confirmatory (or, for that matter, negative) evidence concerning products and traders available at very low cost. More significantly for our purposes, Sartori identifies significant variations in they ways people gather information for their purchases.

Scrutinizing online shopping, Sartori reports that persons acquiring goods and services electronically most often first entered the process with the help of others they already knew, relied on their existing networks to reduce uncertainties in their purchases, but formed new social ties electronically in the process. Thus, Sartori's respondents repeatedly emphasized the significance of kin, friends, and colleagues' opinions when shopping online. As one 33-year-old woman explained:

> I am not quite sure on what I base my decision. Surely on the advice of people at work or of friends. We often discuss it with friends. It always happens, even when I'm looking for the most stupid thing. (Sartori 2002, 139)

But respondents also regularly consulted their new virtual connections in chat, newsgroups, or discussion forums. A 25-year-old man reported:

> It's quite normal to exchange information about products or sites, or else ask advice to someone online. It's even easier to check a site directly since if one is in chat it means you are connected. Sometimes they ask me: "I'm looking for something, can you help me?" For instance it's happened with cell phones. Someone who's looking for a new cell phone and asks who knows a site. Then someone gives a name, someone else a different one, and that way the conversation begins. (Sartori 2002, 138)

However, as Sartori says, the two sources of information are not mutually exclusive; in fact, online acquaintances sometimes become friends. Sartori, therefore, makes a negative and a positive contribution to our general discussion. Negatively, her findings deny the flattening of culture by electronic media. Positively, Sartori shows us once again how creatively people adapt their social relations to different media and forms of consumption.

Conclusions

Although cultural variation plays a significant part in consumption, it is a common mistake to suppose that consumption forms a warm cultural island in a frigid economic sea. Shared understandings and their representations—the components of culture—undergird all of economic life, from e-commerce to sweatshops. Another common error portrays consumption as centering on acquisition of goods and services rather than on their uses. A much clearer understanding of consumption practices comes from recognizing how meaningful social relations pervade economic processes, including production, acquisition, and use of goods and services. Combined, the two mistakes lead to a third pervasive error: treatment of consumption as primarily expressive behavior, whether it expresses social position, local culture, or individual idiosyncrasy. Consumption, like production and distribution, actually does crucial social work, not only sustaining human lives and social institutions but also shaping interpersonal relations.

These recurrent misunderstandings of consumption directly parallel confusions about money. Scholars, social critics, and ordinary people often assume that monetizing goods, services, and social relations strips away their culturally grounded personal meanings: paid personal care, for example, necessarily lacks the intimacy and power of unpaid care. Closely observed, however, intimate social relations turn out to incorporate monetary flows quite productively over a wide range of circum-

stances. The confusion results from overestimating the capacity of media—money, goods, or services—to control human behavior and thereby underestimating the capacity of human beings to bend media into means of pursuing their own social lives.

Similarly, social critics frequently warn against two different versions of consumerism: first, acquisition of standardized goods and services that crush individuality, spontaneity, and local culture, and, second, a headlong rush to accumulate that leaves no time, energy, or imagination to enjoy what you already have. Some mass-produced goods do drive higher-priced, more varied, and superior goods out of markets. Some goods and services (hard drugs provide obvious examples) damage their consumers. Some people do engage in conspicuous consumption to the detriment of their welfare. But our most careful studies of consumption—inside and outside of sociology—challenge the idea that consumers in general are increasingly leading impoverished lives as a consequence of growth in consumption.

Once again, confusion stems from assuming the existence of two Hostile Worlds: a world of rationality, efficiency, and impersonality, on one side; a world of self-expression, cultural richness, and intimacy, on the other—with contact between the two worlds inevitably corrupting both of them. Nor will any of the available Nothing-Buts—nothing but economic calculation, nothing but culture, nothing but power—resolve the dilemma. We have no choice but to pave crossroads connecting continuously negotiated, meaning-drenched social relations with the whole range of economic processes.

Notes

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1. Landmark essays in consumer culture include Appadurai 1986; Brewer and Porter 1993; Bronner 1989; Fox and Lears 1983; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982. For an excellent bibliographic essay on the history of consumption, see Glickman 1999; for a critical review, see Agnew 2003.

2. For observations of interactions between organized politics and consumption in Great Britain, see Hilton 2002.

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